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ABSTRACT

A rhetorical question is an interrogative statement made under circumstances indicating that the speaker or writer does not seek a reply. It is used as a persuasive device or occasionally as a transitional phrase, but there has been little attention paid to the manner in which listeners perceive or categorize rhetorical questions. In an experimental study, subject listeners were asked to identify statements in a speech that were actual declarative assertions, although some of the statements were enunciated as rhetorical questions. Results indicated that listeners who heard a speaker's rhetorical questions in an argumentative context generally perceived the test utterances as statements rather than rhetorical questions. Because of new methods of transformational grammar now being taught, it is possible that future generations will be more sophisticated in their responses to rhetorical questions than those educated in the traditional grammar which is based on structural and functional classification of sentences. (RN)

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THE RHETORICAL QUESTION: ITS PERCEPTION BY LISTENERS

R. L. Benjamin

When Pontius Pilate asked "What is truth?" and--according to Bacon--". . . stayed not for an answer," he may have been implying any one of a number of assertions:

"There is no such thing as truth," OR

"Truth has many meanings," OR

"Truth is insignificant, whatever it is,"

or perhaps something else. Scholars seem generally agreed, however, that whatever motivated Pilate's query, it was not a desire for an answer. This use of the interrogative form, for purposes other than the elicitation of information, we call "rhetorical question." And although this familiar linguistic phenomenon has been much studied re: its rhetorical impact -- as a persuasive tool, a transitional device, or whatever -- little attention has been paid to the way listeners perceive and categorize rhetorical questions encountered in the hurly-burly of everyday discourse. What follows is my report of an attempt in this direction.

A rhetorical question, then -- and this shall be our working definition -- is an interrogative uttered or written under circumstances which clearly indicate that its producer does not seek an answer.

Two points should be noted in connection with this definition. First, "Rhetorical Question" is a functional category; a rhetorical question cannot be distinguished structurally from a real one -- that is, one seeking an answer. Nevertheless some questions -- even considered in isolation -- are much more likely to function really than rhetorically, others vice-versa. "What time is it?" almost invariably calls for an answer; it makes a poor

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rhetorical question at best. "Is it later than we think?" is surely rhetorical; one is hard put to devise a context in which the producer of such a question really wants to know.

On the basis of these examples one is tempted to conclude that rhetorical questions are likely to be of the yes-or-no variety as opposed to open-end (a structural distinction). But such rhetorical questions as "Why stick your neck out?", "Who are we to say?", and "What is truth?", quickly drive us back to the original distinction of intent.

A second feature of the definition is its negative, exclusive wording: ". . . does not seek an answer." If a rhetorical question asks not for an answer, how does it function? Examples we've examined so far have implied statements. But it should be noted that rhetorical questions may function as directives ("Are we going to let them get away with this?") or expressors as well ("Why was I born?").

The experimental study described herewith treats only those rhetorical questions which imply statements. And, as written questions are generally expected to be rhetorical (there being nobody present to answer a direct question), the study is further limited to questions produced orally. Generally, the question is this: How does a listener perceive a speaker's rhetorical question. Specifically: (A) Is the listener aware that a question has been asked, and (B) Does the listener think of the speaker as having asserted the implied answer to the question.

An oral presentation of approximately four minutes' duration was prepared on the subject: The War in Southeast Asia. This speech (the control speech) was composed entirely of assertions; that is, all the sentences were declarative. From this control speech a second (the experimental speech) was constructed, with nine selected assertions reformulated as

rhetorical questions. (The rhetorical questions were declared equivalent to their counterpart statements in the control speech on the basis of an quivalence test given to three English language experts.)

Seventy-four students, enrolled in their first college speech class, participated in the experiment. Thirty-six of these students (in two separate groups) heard a tape recording of the experimental speech; the other thirty-eight heard the control speech. (All groups were randomized to prevent instructor and other biases.) Following the speech all students were given a questionnaire containing fifteen statements. Three of these statements had been present in both speeches; eight were stated in the control speech but were only implied by rhetorical question in the experimental speech; and four were red-herring statements made in neither speech. The students were asked to check those items which were asserted by the speaker.

On the basis of all answers by control students and statement identification by experimental students, an expected percentage error was established. (These errors were presumably due to memory failure, listening lapses or comparable causes.) The expected error was compared with the actual percentage error of the control group. Here is a summary of the results:

(1) Combined experimental and control students made an average error of 23% in identifying assertions made and not made by the speaker. (On this basis, the null hypothesis predicts the same 23% error in question identification by the experimental group. This converts to a total of 66 errors out of 288 possible.)

(2) The actual observed errors in question identification were 207, or about 72%. (An "error" was defined as a check by a statement which the respondent had heard only as a question.)

(3) The 23% expectation was compared with the 72% observation via the chi-square formula, as corrected by Yates, yielding a deviation from expectation which was significant beyond the .001 level.

General Conclusion: Listeners who hear a speaker ask a rhetorical question in an argumentative context generally perceive the speaker to have asserted the statement which the question implies.

What conclusions can be drawn from these results? Clearly any generalizing will depend heavily on the participants' perception of the word "asserted." This word was used in the instructions for the post-speech questionnaire; and participants might well argue that he who implies by rhetorical question has in fact asserted. Changing the word "asserted" to "stated" might indeed produce different results. (Incidentally, nobody asked what was meant by "asserted.") But if we accept the notion that a rhetorical question actually asserts, we must ask what it asserts. We've had two thousand years to ponder Pilate's "What is Truth?", and we've still not agreed as to what (if anything) he was asserting. In preparing this experiment I had to work hard to construct rhetorical questions which did not legitimately imply two or more distinct (if related) assertions. In short, if a rhetorical question asserts, it rarely does so unambiguously. And in affirming (or denying) such a question one incurs all the well-known dangers of affirming (or denying) ambiguous statements.

Can the legal profession help us here? Ever since the gossip columnists of the 30's began asking "What Senator was seen with what secretary?", the legality of slander by rhetorical question has been undergoing court tests. There have been many decisions for the plaintiff and some punitive damages awarded. But to my knowledge the issue in these cases has always been damage to the plaintiff, not whether a question comprised an accusation.

A recent and somewhat surprising impact on our views toward questions comes from the new transformational grammar. As perplexed parents many of us have already been exposed to the new Roberts English Series. In this approach to grammar youngsters starting in grades four through six -- in California, at least -- are taught, among other things, that every question has within it the kernel (or deep structure) of the statement which spawned it. (This is true whether the question is yes/no or open-end, real or rhetorical.) Perhaps the next generation of youngsters will be more sophisticated in their responses to rhetorical questions.

But the students in this study were raised on traditional grammar; and a significant number of them accused a speaker of making assertions when in fact he was uttering questions. Further study may shed increased light on this observation. Does the presence of an introductory phrase (e.g., "After all, . . .") increase the likelihood that a rhetorical question will be perceived as an assertion? What is the impact of allegation by rhetorical question on small group dynamics? Is there any real difference between assertions and certain rhetorical questions? Maybe our entire tradition of classifying sentences by structure and function needs a vigorous overhaul. Meanwhile, the fact that mature adults can cheerfully mistake structural questions for statements, and thus are presumably willing to affirm or deny these questions, should be cause enough for concern.